THE INDIAN RESTAURANT MENU DECODED

Colleen Taylor Sen

THE INDIAN RESTAURANT MENU DECODED

Colleen Taylor Sen

eBook Edition

Designed and Published by
1111 Plaza Drive, Suite 300
Schaumburg, IL 60173

Inquiries:
info@ebooks2go.net
www.ebooks2go.net

ISBN 13: 978-1-61813-050-1
ISBN 10: 1-61813-050-1

All rights reserved.

This book, in its entirety or parts thereof, may not be copied or reproduced in any form, in print or electronically, without the author's permission. Exceptions will only be made when excerpts are used in authorized reviews, interviews and articles, with proper acknowledgments.

Table of Contents

What is an Indian Meal?

A Note on Spices

Indian Restaurants in North America

- North Indian/Pakistani
- South Indian
- Hyderabadi
- Chinese-Indian
- Nepali
- Dhabas
- Sweet and Snack Shops
- Regional Cuisines
- Nepali
- Hindu Temples
- Upscale “Fusion” Restaurants

Components of a Menu

- Soups and Appetizers
- Entrees
- Dal
- Rice
- Bread
- Pickles, Chutneys and Salads
- Dessert
- Beverages

The Health Benefits of Indian Food

Guidelines for Ordering

Some Sample Meals

- North Indian
- South Indian (Vegetarian)

FAQ

Glossary of Common Terms

The Indian Restaurant Menu Decoded

The aim of this guide is to help the diner interpret the menu of Indian restaurants in North America and choose dishes that will not only expand their understanding but also enhance their enjoyment of Indian cooking, one of the world's great cuisines.

The food of the Indian subcontinent (which includes India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Nepal) remains an enigma for many North Americans. Diners who can comfortably navigate a Chinese or Thai menu may find themselves at sea when faced with the choices in an Indian restaurant. Often waiters are reluctant to explain dishes to customers or make suggestions about what they should order. And, unlike Chinese restaurants, Indian restaurants do not offer 'set meals' for groups, although some do offer individual 'thalis' – a selection of main dishes and condiments. Buffets offering a selection of dishes are also popular, especially at lunch.

As a result, many diners limit themselves to ordering a few dishes. Restaurant owners told me that the majority of their customers order just three entrees: tandoori chicken, chicken *tikka masala* (pieces of grilled chicken in a creamy tomato sauce), or *sagor palak paneer* (spinach with farmer's cheese). Samosas are another favorite.

This bewilderment is understandable. For one thing, there's really no such thing as Indian cuisine. India is an enormous country with 24 official languages, eight religions, and a multitude of ethnic and social divisions. Regional culinary differences are greater than in Europe. And India does not have a long tradition of dining outside the home. Religious and social beliefs restricted what one could eat, who could prepare it, and with whom one could eat. Eating out was tolerated largely as a necessity rather than valued as a luxury or new experience.

Unlike a Western meal, a traditional Indian meal does not have separate courses — appetizers, entrees, side dishes, salads, and desserts. This meant that restaurant proprietors had to create menus to conform to Western eating patterns. The resulting menu is a hodgepodge of dishes from different regions and traditions ranging from street food and home cooking to the loft regions of haute cuisine.

WHAT IS AN INDIAN MEAL?

Western meals generally consist of a main course (usually meat or fish), accompanied by smaller side dishes (vegetables, salads), followed by a dessert. An Indian meal is different. There is no ‘main course’ as such, and meat plays a relatively minor role, even for nonvegetarians. Everything is served at the same time and the dishes remain on the table throughout the meal.

Every Indian meal includes a starch (wheat, rice, millet, sorghum, or corn) and *dal* (boiled spiced lentils). They are supplemented by several dry or curried vegetable dishes, a little meat or fish, yogurt, and various condiments, including sweet chutneys and sour or hot pickles.

In such an arrangement, many dishes compete for attention at the same time and you, the diner, become an active participant in the meal by mixing and matching to create your own flavors. If a dish is too bland, add a dab of hot pickle; if it is too spicy, dip your bread in yogurt.

That said, it’s better not to mix everything up on your plate but instead eat items one at a time, going back and forth between them if you like and mixing condiments as your taste dictates. The exception is that sauces and gravies can be poured over rice and mixed in with it.

The standard beverage is water. Traditionally, alcohol was not consumed at Indian meals. The drinking of beer with Indian meals came from the British and has become the drink of choice, especially in the West. However, there is growing interest in drinking wine with Indian food, and we include some suggestions later in this guide.

A NOTE ON SPICES

The most characteristic and distinctive feature of Indian cuisine is the use of. spices in most dishes. Spice is a broad term covering different parts of a plant: fruits or seeds (fennel, mustard, pepper), bark (cinnamon), buds (cloves), stigmas (saffron), roots and rhizomes (turmeric, ginger), even resins (asafetida).

Spices are used in many different ways: they can be ground into a powder called a *masala* (mixture or blend), used whole, or be ground with a liquid (yogurt, coconut milk), onions, garlic, or tomatoes to make a paste. Spices are dry roasted or slightly fried to intensify their flavor. They may be added at several points in the cooking process, including at the very end.

In Indian food, a home-style vegetable or lentil dish may be made with just a few spices (such as turmeric, cumin and coriander) whereas a sumptuous meat or rice dish prepared by a professional chef may contain twenty or more spices, including aromatic flavorings such as cardamom, cloves, and cinnamon.

In the old days cooks ground spices by hand with a rolling pin and stone slab or in a mortar and pestle. Today ready-made spice powders and pastes sold in Indian grocery stores make it much easier to prepare Indian dishes at home. Still, good restaurants usually prepare their own spice mixtures from scratch.

Typical flavorings include —

North Indian/Pakistani meat and rice: Garlic, green and red chilies, ginger, coriander, black pepper, cumin, green and brown cardamom, cloves, cinnamon, nutmeg, mace, saffron, rose water, almonds

Tandoori: Cumin, coriander, cinnamon, cloves, chili powder, ginger, turmeric, garlic, red coloring

North Indian vegetarian. Coriander, cumin, ginger, onions, garlic, turmeric, green and red chilies, mustard seeds, fenugreek

South Indian: fenugreek, mustard seed, urad dal, cumin, coriander, red chilies, curry leaves

INDIAN RESTAURANTS IN NORTH AMERICA

New York (Jackson Heights), Chicago (Devon Avenue), Toronto (Gerard Street), Houston (Hillcroft Avenue), and other North American cities with large South Asian populations have long-standing Indian shopping districts with grocery stores, sari and jewelry shops, and restaurants. But today you'll also find Indian restaurants in suburban shopping malls, smaller cities and university towns.

North Indian/Pakistani

Restaurants serving North Indian/Pakistani food are the most common in the United States and Canada. Their standard fare consists of appetizers, vegetable and meat curries, dals (boiled lentils) and tandoori dishes, plus sometimes a few items from other parts of the Subcontinent, mainly Goa, Bombay, and South India.

Their menus are derived from the restaurants that opened after India gained its independence from Britain in 1947. Roadside stands serving street food have always thrived on the Subcontinent, but restaurants with fixed menus and attractive decor that served Indian (not Western) food opened only in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Since many of the early restaurant founders came from the state of Punjab (which was divided between India and Pakistan in 1947), their menus featured the hearty vegetarian dishes of this region, such as *sag paneer mattar paneer* (peas with cheese), *malai kofta* (vegetable balls served in a creamy sauce), *dal makhani* (a rich thick creamy lentil stew), and stuffed *paratha*. (See the glossary for a definition of these and other terms).

One of the pioneering restaurateurs was Kundan Lal Gujral who created what was to become the world's most popular Indian dish: tandoori chicken – pieces of chicken marinated in yogurt and spices and roasted in a tandoor, a free-standing clay oven. In 1947, he opened his restaurant Moti Mahal near the Red Fort in Delhi. It became an overnight sensation and spawned many imitators. Besides tandoori chicken, Moti Mahal's menu featured kabobs – spiced meat, usually lamb, cooked in the tandoor – and all sorts of delicious baked breads. Another Kundan Lal creation was butter chicken (the progenitor of chicken *tikka masala*), pieces of left-over tandoori chicken served in a buttery tomato sauce. These early restaurants also offered North Indian Muslim meat dishes such as *rogan josh* (boneless lamb curry in an aromatic gravy), *korma* (braised meat simmered in a yogurt-based sauce), keema curry (minced meat in a gravy), dopiaza (meat cooked with a lot of crushed and sliced onions), and *biryani* (an elaborate dish of marinated meat cooked in spices and stock and baked in layers with rice).

To make such dishes sound exotic and sophisticated, proprietors called them “Moghlai” after the Moghul emperors who ruled India from the early 16th to the mid 19th centuries. Sometimes the dishes were named after the emperors themselves – Akbari chicken or Shah Jahan biryani. This terminology is a misnomer, since these dishes existed long before the Moghuls came to power, although they were raised to new heights of refinement in their kitchens. Even today these dishes, when prepared with great care and skill, represent the haute cuisine of the Subcontinent and one of the high points of world cuisine.

Most restaurant menus include a few dishes from other parts of India, including Bombay street snacks, such as *bhel puri*, *vindaloo*, a fiery hot and sour meat dish from Goa; Kerala fish dishes (meen mooli); and *idlis, dosas, sambar* and other dishes from South India.

South Indian

Next in popularity are vegetarian restaurants serving the distinctive food of South India. Small establishments serving strictly vegetarian food have existed in India since the mid-19th century. Many of the cooks got their training in Hindu temples which served vegetarian dishes to worshippers. Those in the town of Udupi (also spelled Udipi) were especially famous for their food, which is why some South Indian restaurants have the word Udupi in their name.

Breakfast is an important meal in South India, and local restaurants opened early in the morning to sell *idlis* (steamed disk-shaped bread made from rice and lentil flour), *dosas* (**crepes** made from lentil and rice flour), *sambar* (a thin hot and sour dal cooked with vegetables), *vada (*deep fried bread made from lentil and rice flour), *upma* (porridge of semolina or cream of wheat cooked with lentils); and coconut chutney, which were standard breakfast fare. In the mid-1930s K.K. Rao opened Woodlands restaurant in Madras (today Chennai) to serve South Indian food in a more elegant setting. One of its specialties was an enormous yard-wide paper-thin *dosa*, which became a standard restaurant item in North American establishments.

A delicious nonvegetarian South Indian cuisine is that of the Chettinads, a wealthy trading community famous for its fiery meat and seafood dishes. Restaurants specializing in this cuisine are located in New Jersey and Toronto.

Hyderabadi

The former capital of the Nizams of Hyderabad, once the richest people in the world,

Hyderabad is known for its delicious cuisine that combines elements of north and south. Specialties include Hyderabadi biryani, *khichri* (rice and lentils) served with minced meat and a sour dal; *mirch ka salan*, peppers in a peanut-based sauce*; haleem*, a white and meat porridge; and vadas with sambar. An emblematic dessert is *double-ka-keetha*, a very sweet fried bread pudding. Many dhabas in North America are run by people from Hyderabad.

Chinese-Indian

Restaurants serving an Indianized version of Chinese food are extremely popular on the Subcontinent and have in recent years been transplanted to North America. Typical dishes include chicken corn soup, Manchurian chicken or cauliflower in a garlicky sauce, sweet and sour lamb, and chili chicken. The sauces are colored bright red and heavily flavored with garlic and chili.

Dhabas

These hole-in-the-wall establishments are popular eating places for taxi drivers from the Subcontinent and Africa. Their menus feature *kabobs, pulaos, biryanis, nihari* (a rich spicy meat stew*), paya* (goat trotters), and breads. The owners and clientele are largely Muslim;some dhabas have small mosques attached or are located near large mosques. The menu is sometimes posted on a blackboard. Many are open twenty-four hours and serve delicious hearty breakfasts.

Sweet and Snack Shops

In recent years, shops and cafes serving salty savory snacks and sweets have opened in Indian shopping districts in North America. Indians love to snack, and an afternoon tea or tiffin featuring salty savories like samosas and pakoras and sweets are part of daily life. You can also buy snacks and sweets to take home.

Regional Cuisines

Large North American cities have a few restaurants (alas, not enough!) specializing in food from other parts of India, including the delicious vegetarian cuisine of Gujarat, the seafood creations of Kerala, the fiery hot and sour dishes of Goa, or the fiery food of the Chettinads. Smaller establishments often close after a few months because of a lack of patronage so if you find one, run, don’t walk, to try it out!

Nepali

This small Himalayan country borders on India, and their cuisines have much in common. However, Nepali curries are generally based on tomatoes, not yogurt or coconut milk, and use fewer and milder spices The influence of neighboring Tibet can be seen in the use of noodles, bamboo shoots, and soy beans, and the famous momos — small steamed or sautéed dumplings filled with meat or vegetables.

Hindu Temples

Usually located in the suburbs of large cities, some Hindu temples (for example, the Hindu Temple of Greater Chicago in Bartlett, Illinois, and the Malibu Hindu Temple near Los Angeles) have their own kitchens where cooks from India prepare South India vegetarian dishes on weekends. Visitors are welcome.

Upscale ‘Fusion’ Restaurants

At secular temples of cuisine such as Vij’s in Vancouver or Tabla in New York, talented chefs combine Indian and non-Indian techniques and ingredients, with an emphasis on local products. A menu might feature such dishes as Hudson Valley duck curry, braised with caramelized onions and star anise, or Creekstone Farms Beef short rib samosa. These restaurants have extensive wine lists and elegant settings – and prices to match.

You've Just Finished your Free Sample

Enjoyed the preview?

Buy: http://www.ebooks2go.com